THE AMBIVALENT GOD: AN EXAMINATION OF GANESHA'S CHARACTER AND NATURE

EXCERPT FROM „INDIA AND ITS GODS“

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1. Origins: The Vināyakas as Obstacle-Creators

The earliest traces of figures associated with the later Ganesha are found in the context of the Vināyakas, a group of entities described primarily as malevolent and obstructive in early Brahmanical texts. The *Mānava Gṛhyasūtra* (MGS), dated tentatively between 600-300 BCE [1], mentions four such Vināyakas: Śālakaṭaṅkaṭa, Kūṣmāṇḍarājaputra, Usmita, and Devayajana.[2] These beings were characterized as demonic spirits whose main function was to plague humans and create obstacles (*vighna*).[1] Possession by them led to nightmares, seeing inauspicious figures (bald men, ascetics, etc.), and misfortune such as loss of kingdoms, infertility, or crop failure.[2] The MGS describes specific appeasement rituals (*śānti*) to ward off these harmful influences.[1] Similar descriptions appear in the *Baijavāpa Gṛhyasūtra*.[2] These early texts represent a phase where Vināyakas were feared malevolent spirits requiring propitiation.[1]

A significant development occurs in the later *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (YS), around the 6th century CE.[1] Here, the concept consolidates into a single Vināyaka, appointed by Rudra (Shiva) and Brahmā as the leader of the Gaṇas (celestial hosts, often associated with Shiva), thus also bearing the title Gaṇapati.[1] Although Yājñavalkya interprets the four names from the MGS as designations for this one Vināyaka, son of Ambikā (a name for Parvati) [2], this Vināyaka-Gaṇapati retains an ambivalent nature. While recognized as a divine figure (*deva*) [3], he continues to cause obstacles and suffering if not properly worshipped.[1] The YS describes specific appeasement rites, which may include offerings like fish, meat (raw and cooked), wine, radish, cakes, and sweets (*modaka*) [4] – offerings sometimes considered impure, possibly indicating Tantric influences.[4] This phase marks a transition: the originally negative character of the Vināyakas is modified by integrating a single figure into the divine pantheon, yet retaining his dangerous potential and the need for specific propitiation rituals.[1] The specific offerings mentioned in the YS, such as fish, meat, and wine, already presage practices that would later play an important role in Tantrism and could indicate early connections to non-orthodox traditions or those focused on power acquisition.

Scholars like A.K. Narain and Y. Krishan see these early Vināyakas as a key origin for the later Ganesha.[5] The connection to these initially malevolent spirits, whose primary characteristic was obstacle creation, provides a plausible explanation for the deep-seated ambivalence in Ganesha's character, which resurfaces even in later stages of his development.[5] This origin potentially points to an integration of folk or non-Brahmanical beliefs.[5]

2. Ganesha/Vināyaka in Buddhist Traditions: Demon, Obstacle, and Integration

The reception of Ganesha, usually under the name Vināyaka or Gaṇapati, in various Buddhist traditions offers crucial insights into his complex nature and the selective evolution of his character within Hinduism. While mainstream Hinduism (and Jainism) predominantly portrays Ganesha as a benevolent obstacle-remover, certain Buddhist schools, particularly in China and Vajrayāna, preserve and emphasize his originally negative or ambivalent traits as an obstacle-creator and demonic force.

2.1 Chinese Buddhism (Tantra)

The most extensive and explicit portrayal of Vināyaka as a negative, demonic figure is found in Tantric texts of the Chinese Buddhist canon. Under the name of "*Vināyaka, the Hinderer*", Gaṇeśa became an important part of the pantheon of demonic beings described in the canonic literature of the 7th and 8th centuries. [9] Here, he consistently functions as *zhàng'àishén* (障礙神), an "obstructive deity".[9] His primary role is that of the obstacle-creator (*vighna-kartā*), who disturbs Buddhist practitioners, causes fear, sends bad dreams, and generally hinders spiritual progress.[9] Texts like the *Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī Sūtra* (commented on by Yijing) and the *Mahāvairocana Tantra* mention Vināyaka(s) as demonic entities to be controlled, expelled, or even destroyed through mantras and rituals.[9]

There was also a revulsion expressed toward the fact that this spirit was shown in the form of being a human with an elephant head. One of the earliest descriptions of this feature came in the *Dharma Gupta Vinaya* translated by Dharmaksema in the 5th century. In this text the Chinese were to find that the punishment for breaking the rules of conduct as outlined in the vinaya were severe, and those who failed to fulfill their obligations to those rules of conduct could expect to be born with limbs missing, with two heads or even three, or with the head of an animal, either horse or elephant.* Paramārtha, in the 6th-century rendering of the *Loka Prajñaptyabhi Dharma*, provided the Chinese with the frightening notion that there are those whose karma is so bad that they will be born into one of the hells, and in that hell with all its tortures and fires, they will have the further punishment of possessing the awful feature of having the body of a man with the head of an elephant.† This aversion to the elephant head continued to appear in texts. The famous Korean disciple of Hsüan-tsang (Xuanzang), Wŏnch'ŭk, in his commentary to the *Jen wang pan jo po lo mi chin*g (The Perfection of Wisdom of the Benevolent King) speaks of the elephant-

* Taisho Shinshu Daizöky: The Tripitaka in Chinese, J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, eds., 85 vols. (Tokyo: Taisho Issaiky Kankökai, 1924-32), 1428-814b (hereafter 1).

† T: 1428-814b, T: 1644 - 208c, T: 1708-408b, T: 999-582a, T: 1644-208c, T: 1671-739b.

headed spirit that hinders all vows.* Dānapāla in his 983 translation of the *Mahāsāhasra Pramardana Sūtra* lists the elephant-headed one as a yakṣa.* Paramārtha in 558 - 59, provided a translation of the *Li shih a pi'i t'an lun* (The Abhidharma of the Natural Laws), a text concerning astronomy and cosmological features, where we find a description of the hell in which there are creatures with bodies of men and heads of elephants.* The same idea of the elephant-headed ones in hell was echoed by the translation team of Jih-ch'eng and Dharmaraksa in the *Fu kai cheng hsing so chi ching*.* Thus long before any of the cultic aspects of Gaṇeśa appear in the extant texts, the Chinese had an idea that elephant-headed creatures were the result of bad karma and were the symbols of evil actions.

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Although some later texts hint at redemption and even reward from the tamed Vināyaka becoming an ally [9], the negative image dominates, largely explaining Ganesha's limited popularity in Chinese Buddhism.[10] Later, with the development of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, Vināyaka also took on more positive roles as a subjugator of demons and a protective deity.[11]

2.2 Vajrayāna and Tibetan Buddhism

In Vajrayāna Buddhism, especially in Tibet, Ganesha/Vināyaka is often depicted ambivalently or negatively. A common iconographic representation shows him as a subdued deity being trampled by more powerful Buddhist figures like Mahākāla, Aparājitā, Parṇaśabarī, or Vighnāntaka.[3] These depictions symbolize the overcoming of obstacles and the subjugation of non-Buddhist or problematic forces under Buddhist doctrine.[11]

Depictions of Mahākāla and Vināyaka under his feet are particularly popular. Mahākāla is considered to be a wrathful form of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of universal compassion. He is the Dalai Lama's protector and is publicly praised by him for his superiority over Vināyaka. If Avalokiteśvara appears as Mahākāla to defeat Vināyaka, this implies that there must be a victim suffering at the hands of Vināyaka. This also highlights Vināyaka's level of power, which must be quite high. How, then, could Vināyaka be a benevolent spirit? I find it interesting that people emphasise the metaphorical nature of that depiction. At least the Dalai Lama does not consider this to be metaphorical.

On the other hand, Ganesha is also welcomed into Tibetan Buddhism, considered to be a form, or an emanation, of Avalokiteśvara. That is, obviously, quite absurd. How could he be the bodhisattva and at the same time the evil spirit he is trampling?

The Tibetan Buddhist canon contains about thirty texts dealing with Ganesha (often called Gaṇapati or Vināyaka).[11] These texts, mostly translations of Indian originals, reflect remarkable ambivalence. On one hand, similar to Chinese Tantra, some scriptures describe him as Vināyaka – a demon who causes suffering and must be propitiated or liberated to avoid destruction.[16] Some texts also describe rituals for destroying enemies by invoking him, indicating the use of his power for potentially harmful purposes.[9] Nepalese texts provide spells invoking Gaṇapati not only to bestow wealth but also to harm enemies.[9]

He is also venerated as a wealth deity who can grant worldly goods and pleasures like food and sex.[9] His role as an obstacle-remover is also acknowledged, often in the form of the dancing Nṛtta Gaṇapati, which spread from Nepal to Tibet.[3] The iconography of these positive forms is often complex and fearsome (e.g., Mahā Rakta Gaṇapati): red-colored, multi-armed (e.g., twelve arms), three-eyed, holding weapons (axe, arrow, hook, vajra, sword, spear, pestle, bow, khaṭvāṅga, shield) and skull cups filled with blood and human flesh.[11]

The divergent portrayals of Ganesha in Buddhism, especially the retention of negative aspects in certain traditions, provide a crucial counterpoint to his development in Hinduism. They suggest that the transformation into a predominantly benevolent figure was not an inevitable evolution but a specific theological choice within Hinduism (and Jainism). Buddhist sources confirm the existence of older, less positive conceptions that were selectively downplayed in mainstream Hinduism. Furthermore, the dual strategy of *subjugation* (trampling iconography) and *assimilation* in Tibetan Buddhism demonstrates sophisticated theological mechanisms for dealing with powerful external deities, reflecting complex inter-religious dynamics.[11]

3. Tantric Manifestations and Practices related to Ganesha

Tantrism, in both its Hindu and Buddhist forms, represents another significant context where Ganesha's ambivalent and often fearsome aspects emerge. Tantra focuses on the direct experience and manipulation of divine energy (Śakti), often employing unconventional or deliberately transgressive methods (Vāmācāra) to break through ordinary limitations and access this power.[19] Goals often include not only spiritual liberation but also the attainment of worldly power and abilities (*siddhi*).[6]

3.1 Wrathful (Krodha) Manifestations

Particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, but also in Hindu Tantric traditions, Ganesha manifests in wrathful (*krodha*) forms. The aforementioned Mahā Rakta Gaṇapati is one example.[11] These forms are characterized by a terrifying appearance: often red-colored, with multiple arms (up to twelve or more), three eyes, visible tusks, and a variety of weapons (axe, arrow, hook, vajra, sword, spear, etc.), as well as macabre attributes like skull cups (*kapāla*) filled with blood and human flesh.[11] These wrathful aspects are typical of Tantric deities used to overcome powerful obstacles, subdue demons, or transform negative energies.[28]

3.2 Association with Impurity and Violence

Tantric rituals involving Ganesha often include offerings and practices considered impure (*tamasic*) from an orthodox Hindu perspective. This includes the offering of meat, fish, and alcohol (the so-called *Pañcamakāra* or their symbolic substitutes).[19] Even the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* mentioned fish and meat offerings for Vināyaka.[4] The Tantric rationale involves transcending the duality of pure and impure to release and utilize the energy bound within these substances.[19]

Furthermore, there is evidence of rituals aimed at violence or harm. Some texts describe rituals for enemy destruction or gaining power over others, potentially using harmful or inauspicious substances like ape fat, corpse hair, or human bones.[32] Tantric worship of Ganesha can include *abhicāra* rituals designed to delude, enslave, paralyze, or kill enemies.[33] The iconography reflects this through the depiction of weapons and skull cups.[11] *Gaṇacakra* rites, associated with Ganesha in Tantric contexts (like 14th/15th century Java), often took place in impure locations such as cremation grounds.[6]

3.3 Antinomian Practices: The Ucchiṣṭa Gāṇapatya Sect

An extreme example of Tantric Ganesha worship is the Hindu Ucchiṣṭa Gāṇapatya sect, which followed the Vāmācāra ("left-handed path").[25] The name derives from *ucchiṣṭa*, meaning "leftovers," particularly food ritually defiled by saliva.[33] Adherents worshipped Ganesha in a state of ritual impurity, such as naked or with food remnants in the mouth.[33]

This sect deliberately disregarded orthodox purity rules, caste barriers, and traditional sexual norms.[4] Their practices involved erotic rituals and corresponding iconography: Ucchiṣṭa Ganapati is often depicted with a naked Śakti on his lap, his trunk touching her yoni (vagina) or she touching his lingam (phallus); the deity himself is sometimes shown with an erected phallus.[33] The goal of these transgressive practices was not only spiritual liberation through overcoming dualities but explicitly also the attainment of *siddhis* (magical powers), worldly benefits (*bhoga*), protection, control over the senses, and the power to perform *abhicāra* rituals.[6] The sect claimed to be a quick path (*kṣipra siddhi*

dāyaka) to wish fulfillment but emphasized the need for guru-led initiation due to the potency and potential dangers of the practices.[37]

The Tantric Ganesha thus embodies a raw, untamed power. This quality connects him to the primal energy (Śakti) central to Tantra and explains his suitability for practices aiming at direct power manipulation, bypassing orthodox constraints.[19] His fundamental link to obstacles (*vighna*) places him at the nexus of power and control that Tantrism engages with. His Tantric persona corresponds to his well-known core nature within a specific esoteric framework. The existence of sects like the Ucchiṣṭa Gāṇapatya, though heterodox, highlights the limitations of a purely "sanitized" Puranic Ganesha image in fulfilling all human needs, suggesting a persistent demand for access to divine power through more direct, potent, and potentially dangerous means, for which Ganesha remained a key figure due to his origins and power related to obstacles.[25]

4. The Puranic Ganesha: Transformation, Reinterpretation, and the Question of "Sanitization"

The Purāṇas, a vast corpus of Hindu texts emerging from around 300 CE and compiled over many centuries [9], play a crucial role in establishing the dominant image of Ganesha today. Although his clearly recognizable form appears by the 4th-5th centuries CE [6], more detailed narratives about his life and deeds are found primarily in later Purāṇas (c. 600-1300 CE).[3] Key texts dedicated to Ganesha include the *Ganesha Purāṇa*, the *Mudgala Purāṇa*, and the *Gaṇapati Atharvaśīrṣa*, but numerous myths in major Purāṇas like the *Śiva Purāṇa*, *Skanda Purāṇa*, *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Liṅga Purāṇa*, and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* also shape his image.[4]

4.1 The Dominant Role as Obstacle-Remover and Lord of Beginnings

In the Purāṇas, Ganesha is almost universally established as the benevolent "Remover of Obstacles" (*Vighnahartā*, *Vighna-vināśana*, *Vighneśa*, *Vighneśvara*) and the "Lord of Beginnings".[3] A central precept, explicitly mentioned in texts like the *Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa*, is the *agra-pūjā* – the first worship of Ganesha before any other god and before commencing any important undertaking (ritual, house building, business, journey).[47] This practice is intended to ensure a smooth process and the success of the venture.[48] His invocation alone is said to suffice to remove all obstacles (*Yasya smaraṇa mātrena sarvavighno vinaśyati*).[47]

4.2 Mythological Integration and Family Stories

A primary concern of Puranic narratives appears to be the firm anchoring of Ganesha within the established pantheon, particularly within Shiva's family. Numerous myths

explain his divine parentage, usually as the son of Shiva and Parvati.[48] Variations exist where he is created by Parvati alone (e.g., from body-scurf) [2], by Shiva alone (e.g., from his laughter) [27], or in other ways.[45]

Equally diverse are the myths explaining his distinctive iconography – the elephant head and broken tusk. The most famous story tells how Parvati creates Ganesha as a guard while she bathes. Shiva, prevented from entering by Ganesha and not recognizing him, cuts off his head in anger. To console the distraught Parvati, Shiva replaces the head with that of the first creature his attendants find – an elephant.[2] Other versions recount a beheading by the gaze of Shani (Saturn) [27] or the tusk breaking in a fight with Parashurama.[48] These dramatic narratives not only explain his form but also emphasize his divine origin and connection to the major gods. Integration is further solidified by portraying him as the brother of Kartikeya (Skanda).[54]

4.3 Elevation to Supreme Being

In the specific tradition of the Gāṇapatyas, who worship Ganesha as the supreme deity, his elevation reaches its zenith.[35] Texts like the *Ganesha Purāṇa* and the *Mudgala Purāṇa* (whose exact dating is debated but likely finalized between the 13th and 18th centuries [35]) present him as the supreme being (Parabrahman), uniting both transcendent (*nirguṇa*) and manifest (*saguṇa*) aspects.[35] He is depicted as the origin of the universe and assumes the functions of the Trimūrti (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva).[9] The *Ganesha Purāṇa* describes his various incarnations across the four world ages (Yugas).[43] This theological elevation is also reflected in his inclusion in the *Pañcāyatana Pūjā* of the Smārta tradition, where he is worshipped alongside Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, and Surya as one of the five main forms of the one, formless Brahman.[54]

The Puranic elevation of Ganesha, even to the point of equating him with Brahman, can be seen as a strategic theological response to his immense and growing popularity.[9] By fully integrating him, even as the supreme god, Puranic authors (representing mainstream traditions) could harness his appeal and ensure his worship remained within their framework, possibly preventing the Gāṇapatya movement from becoming entirely separate and demonstrating the inclusivity and adaptability of the Puranic system.[4]

4.4 The Debate on "Sanitization"

Given the discrepancy between the benevolent Puranic Ganesha and the malevolent Vināyakas of earlier texts, scholars like Paul Courtright and M.K. Dhavalikar have

proposed the hypothesis of a deliberate "sanitization" or reshaping of his image.[25] Courtright argues that Puranic authors were aware of the problematic background and actively sought to obscure Ganesha's demonic origins, for instance, through alternative etymologies for the name Vināyaka or by emphasizing birth and family myths that firmly anchored him in the established pantheon.[10] Specifically, the proliferation of diverse and partly contradictory birth narratives – such as the creation from Parvati's body-scurf, from Shiva's laughter, or the dramatic story of the beheading by Shiva and replacement with an elephant's head – can be interpreted as an attempt to construct authoritative, divine origins intended to overshadow the earlier, more problematic associations with the malevolent Vinayakas.

Dhavalikar describes a clear transformation from *vighna-kartā* (obstacle-creator) to *vighna-hartā* (obstacle-remover), which he places around the 6th century CE.[25] This transformation implies a conscious shift or re-evaluation of his function, where the originally negative role was downplayed or positively reinterpreted.[42]

The fact that Ganesha appears prominently relatively late in major texts like the epics (the scribe episode in the Mahābhārata is considered a later interpolation [5]) and his late inclusion in the orthodox pantheon support the idea that he needed to be integrated and legitimized.[3] Such processes often involve adaptation and potentially downplaying aspects that do not fit the established order. The Puranic texts themselves, with their sometimes contradictory origin legends, can be seen as reflecting this complex process, perhaps more one of harmonization and legitimization than complete suppression.[36]

However, the sheer variety and sometimes contradictory nature of Ganesha's origin myths within the Purāṇas themselves suggest the "sanitization" process was neither monolithic nor entirely successful in eliminating ambiguity.[36] It seems more like a dynamic negotiation between integrating a popular figure and reconciling various pre-existing local traditions about him. Rather than a single, sanitized official story, the Purāṇas present a collection of narratives, indicating a complex assimilation process where complete harmonization may have been impossible or undesirable, leaving room for his inherent complexity.[36]

5. Iconographic Development: From Yakṣa-like Figures to the Multifaceted Deity

The evolution of Ganesha's iconography mirrors his theological transformation and provides visual clues to his origins and increasing complexity.

5.1 Earliest Depictions (c. 1st - 4th C CE)

The earliest known representations of Ganesha are relatively rare and differ significantly from later, standardized forms. Terracotta figures are found from the 1st century CE onwards.[42] Early stone images come from Mathura and are assigned to the Kushan period (c. 2nd-3rd C CE).[42] Other early examples are found in Ter (Satavahana/Early Vakataka, 3rd C CE) [56] and Hemalapuri near Ramtek (Vakataka, 4th C CE, showing Kushan influence).[56]

These early figures are often two-armed [42], standing or seated. Typical attributes might include a bowl of sweets (*modaka*) being sampled by the trunk [56], an axe (*paraśu*) [42], or a radish (*mūlaka*).[42] While the elephant head is present, it can be less pronounced or stylized. However, the potbelly (*lambodara*) and single tusk (*ekadanta*) appear to be early characteristic features.[42]

Scholars often interpret these early forms in connection with Yakṣas, nature spirits frequently associated with fertility, wealth, and sometimes grotesque features (like potbellies).[42] Dhavalikar suggests the elephant head itself might derive from a Yakṣa form or a pre-Vedic tribal deity (e.g., totem of the Hastika tribes near Kabul [48]).[4] The radish attribute could point to early Vināyaka appeasement rituals (the YS mentions radish offerings [4]) or agricultural fertility cults.[42] These connections support the hypothesis of Ganesha's popular, possibly non-Brahmanical, origins.

5.2 Consolidation in the Gupta Period (c. 4th - 6th C CE)

During the Gupta period, the number of Ganesha depictions increases, and his iconographic form begins to solidify.[15] Significant examples from this era include sculptures in Cave 6 of the Udayagiri Caves near Vidisha (often considered the earliest datable representation, alongside the Mātṛkās) [60], in the Shiva temple at Bhumara [42], and on Ramgarh Hill.[56] The elephant head and protruding belly are now established features.[42] Although two-armed forms persist, four-armed depictions might emerge during this time.[40] Varāhamihira, in his *Bṛhat-saṃhitā* (late 5th/early 6th C), already describes an established iconography.[56]

5.3 Medieval and Later Developments (from c. 7th C CE)

From the 7th century onwards, Ganesha images spread rapidly throughout India and Southeast Asia.[48] The four-armed form becomes the standard, codified in Puranic sources and iconographic texts.[40] Typical attributes in the four hands are the broken tusk, a sweet (*modaka*), an axe (*paraśu*) or elephant goad (*aṅkuśa*), and a noose (*pāśa*).[13]

Simultaneously, diverse variations emerge:

• **Multi-armed Forms:** Forms with 14 or 20 arms appear in Central India in the 9th/10th C [40]; Tantric forms can have 12 or more arms.[11]

• **Additional Attributes:** The serpent (*nāga*) becomes a common element, worn as a necklace, belt, sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), coiled at the ankles, or as a throne.[34] A third eye, the sectarian mark (*tilaka*), or a crescent moon on the forehead (in the *Bhālacandra* form) may be added.[34]

• **Vehicle (Vāhana):** The mouse (*mūṣaka* or rat) establishes itself from the 7th C in sculptures (first in western and central India) as his mount and is later mentioned in Puranas like the *Matsya Purāṇa* and *Ganesha Purāṇa*.[40] The symbolism of the mouse is multifaceted: representing the subdued pest/obstacle, desire and ego, the ability to penetrate secret places, or the equality of all life.[48] Notably, the mouse is often absent in Southeast Asian depictions.[6]

• **Specific Forms:** Distinct forms develop, such as the dancing Ganesha (*Nṛtta Gaṇapati*) [2], forms with one or more Śaktis (consorts) [48], Tantric and wrathful manifestations (see Section 3), subdued forms in Buddhism (see Section 2), and specific regional variants.

The gradual addition of attributes like multiple arms, weapons (noose, goad), the serpent, and the mouse mount from the Gupta period onwards reflects Ganesha's absorption of functions and symbolism from other major deities like Indra (*aṅkuśa*, *vajra*, lotus), Varuṇa (*pāśa*), and Shiva (crescent moon, serpent, tiger skin).[42] This visual syncretism parallels the textual efforts in the Purāṇas to fully integrate him into the established pantheon and elevate his status.

The possible shift from agricultural symbols (radish, corn-sheaf [5]) in early depictions towards more martial or royal attributes (axe, goad, noose [34]) in later standard iconography might indicate a transition from popular fertility origins to a more formalized role within the Puranic-Shaivite cosmic order.

6. Kangiten in Japan: The Demanding and Jealous Aspect

In Japanese Buddhism, primarily in the Shingon and Tendai schools, Ganesha/Vināyaka exists under the name Kangiten (歓喜天, "God of Bliss"), also known as Shōten or Shōden (聖天, "sacred/noble god").[9] He inherited names like Ganapati and Vinayaka from Hinduism.[9] The worship of Kangiten reveals a remarkable ambivalence, preserving aspects often downplayed in popular Hinduism.

On one hand, Kangiten is revered as an extremely powerful deity who grants wishes – even seemingly impossible ones –, removes obstacles, bestows great fortune and success, and invisibly accompanies his devotees from conception throughout life.[9] On the other hand, he is considered volatile, demanding, and jealous.[9] Believed to still be bound by passions (*kleshas*), he is said to react quickly with anger and send obstacles or punishments if neglected or offended.[9] Accounts, possibly like those in the monk Tankai's biography (though specific details are absent in the provided sources), often illustrate this demanding nature and the need for elaborate appeasement rituals.[9] It is even mentioned that the cult can fulfill immoral wishes in exchange for appropriate offerings[9] – a capability reminiscent of the *abhicāra* rituals (rituals aimed at harming enemies) described in certain Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions associated with Ganesha/Ganapati.

This perceived danger is reflected in worship practices. Kangiten is considered a *hibutsu*, a "hidden deity," whose images in temples are deemed too sacred for public display and are kept behind curtains or in locked shrines.[2] Rituals are performed by qualified monks out of public sight, and lay devotees are often discouraged from direct veneration or require special guidance.[2] The rituals themselves are classified according to perceived efficacy and danger.[9] Specific offerings include "bliss buns" (*kangi-dan*), radishes, fruits, and wine (sake).[2]

Iconographically, Kangiten appears both as a single male figure with an elephant head, similar to the Hindu Ganesha, and – characteristically for Japan – in the dual form (*Sōshin Kangiten*): an embracing male-female couple, both with elephant heads and human bodies.[2] This form often carries erotic connotations.[2]

Kangiten's demanding and potentially dangerous character directly links back to the early Vināyakas who required appeasement [1] and the Tantric understanding of deities as powerful but not necessarily benevolent forces.[9] The Japanese tradition thus seems to have preserved aspects of Ganesha's pre-Puranic or Tantric ambivalence. The secrecy and perceived danger surrounding Kangiten worship strongly suggest this tradition actively engages with the *vighna-kartā* (obstacle-creating) aspect, viewing his power as potent but requiring careful management.[9] This contrasts sharply with the open, universally accessible worship of the benevolent Ganesha in mainstream Hinduism.

The prominence of the dual-bodied *Sōshin Kangiten* form also represents a unique theological development, possibly emphasizing themes of union, bliss (Kangiten = "God of Bliss"), and the generative power arising from the conjunction of opposites – a common theme in esoteric Buddhism, but with a specific iconographic expression here.[9] While Ganesha is sometimes depicted with Śaktis in Hinduism [48], the fully integrated,

embracing dual elephant-headed form is characteristic of Japanese Buddhism, suggesting a specific local interpretation focused on union and bliss as the core of this deity's power.

7. Synthesis of Dualities: Assessing Ganesha's Inherent Ambivalence vs. Consistent Core

The examination of Ganesha across different eras, regions, and traditions reveals a remarkable range of characteristics and roles, often contradictory:

• **Obstacle-Creator vs. Obstacle-Remover:** From the initially malevolent Vināyakas [1] and the demonic obstacle-creator in early Chinese Buddhism [9] to the celebrated *Vighnahartā* of the Purāṇas.[3]

• **Malevolent/Demonic vs. Benevolent/Divine:** The demonic nature of the Vināyakas [2] and some Buddhist depictions [16] contrasts with the divine, kind figure of popular Hinduism.[48]

• **Wrathful/Transgressive vs. Gentle/Orthodox:** The fearsome Tantric forms (Krodha, Ucchiṣṭa) with associations of violence and impurity [15] differ radically from the child-friendly, sweet-loving image.[48]

• **Subdued vs. Supreme:** Vajrayāna iconography shows him trampled [11], while the Gāṇapatya tradition and Purāṇas position him as the supreme god or at least the first to be worshipped (*agra-pūjā*).[4]

• **Demanding/Jealous vs. Accessible/Forgiving:** The volatile Kangiten in Japan [9] contrasts with the easily accessible and gracious Ganesha of mainstream Hinduism.[42]

• **Celibate vs. Married:** In some traditions, he is considered celibate, while in others, he is married to Buddhi (Intelligence) and Siddhi (Success) or Riddhi (Prosperity).[48]

Given this diverse and contradictory evidence, the question arises whether Ganesha possesses a consistent core character merely perceived ambivalently, or if his nature is inherently ambivalent. The notion of a purely benevolent core that is simply misunderstood seems difficult to sustain given the explicit textual and iconographic evidence for malevolence, wrath, transgression, and subjugation in significant historical traditions. These variations are too fundamental to dismiss as mere misinterpretations.

More plausible is the assumption of an **inherent ambivalence** rooted in his core function as the lord over *vighna*. *Vighna* denotes obstacles, disturbances, but also the contingency and unpredictability of existence itself. Power over *vighna* logically includes the ability both to create and remove obstacles. This fundamental power is, in itself, morally neutral

or ambivalent. Different traditions, depending on their theological needs and goals, have emphasized different aspects of this power:

• Early traditions and those concerned with controlling untamed forces (Tantra, early Buddhism) focused on the potentially dangerous, obstacle-creating aspect (*vighna-kartā*).

• Mainstream Hinduism, valuing integration, order, and accessibility, emphasized the benevolent, obstacle-removing aspect (*vighna-hartā*).

The following table summarizes the differing characteristics of Ganesha/Vināyaka in key traditions, illustrating this context-dependent manifestation of his ambivalent nature:

Comparative Analysis of Ganesha/Vināyaka Characteristics in Key Traditions

1. **Early Sūtras/Smṛtis (MGS/YS)**
2. **Puranic Hinduism (Mainstream)**
3. **Chinese Buddhism (Early/Tantra)**
4. **Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayāna)**
5. **Hindu Tantra (Ucchiṣṭa)**
6. **Japanese Shingon (Kangiten)**

I - Primary Role

1. Obstacle-Creator
2. Obstacle-Remover
3. Obstacle-Creator (Demon)
4. Ambivalent: Obstacle-Creator/Remover, Wealth God, Protector
5. Power Attainment, Siddhi-Giver
6. Obstacle-Remover, Wish-Granter (but also Creator)

II - Moral Nature

1. Malevolent
2. Benevolent
3. Malevolent/Demonic
4. Ambivalent: Demonic/Subdued & Divine/Emanation
5. Transgressive/Amoral
6. Ambivalent: Kind & Volatile/Demanding/Jealous

III - Assoc. with Impurity

1. Yes (YS: Meat/Fish/Wine offerings) [4]
2. No (Generally sattvic)
3. No (Focus on expulsion)
4. Yes (Krodha forms, skull cups, enemy rituals) [9]
5. Yes (Vāmācāra, sex rites) [33]
6. Yes (Wine offering, pot. immoral wishes) [9]

IV - Relation to Pantheon

- External/Demonic (MGS), Integrated (YS)
- Integrated-Elevated (Son, Agra-pūjā)
- External/Demonic (to expel)
- Ambivalent: Subdued (trampled) & Integrated (Emanation) [11]
- Supreme (within sect) [35]
- Integrated (Buddhist Deva/Ten)

V - Key Iconography

1. Unclear (Textual)
2. 4 Arms, Elephant Head, Tusk, Modaka, Axe/Goad/Noose, Mouse [40]
3. Unclear (Textual)
4. Variable: Red/White/Yellow, multi-armed, weapons, skull cups, dancing [11]
5. 4/6 Arms, Naked Śakti, Erotic [33]
6. Single or Dual (Embracing), Elephant Heads [9]

VI - Worship Style

1. Appeasement [2]
2. Devotion (Bhakti), Puja [44]
3. Control, Expulsion, Appeasement [9]
4. Ambivalent: Propitiation, Veneration, Rituals
5. Esoteric Rituals (Guru-led) [38]
6. Secret Rituals, Caution, Appeasement [9]

In summary: The creation of obstacles plays a major role in four of six important traditions, exclusively in two of them, while in the other two he also removes them. Only mainstream Puranic Hinduism describes him solely as an obstacle remover. In four of six major traditions, his characteristics are associated with impurity, while his moral nature is described as ambivalent, demonic, or transgressive. Only in mainstream Puranic Hinduism is he described as exclusively benevolent.

This table highlights that assuming a single, consistent core character perceived differently does not do justice to the complexity of the evidence. Instead, everything points towards an inherent ambivalence that grants Ganesha his remarkable adaptability.

Precisely this inherent ambivalence might be the key to Ganesha's enduring power and relevance across such diverse traditions and cultures. His complexity allows him to be adapted and reinterpreted for various theological needs and cultural contexts, making him a uniquely versatile figure. A purely benevolent or purely malevolent figure might not have achieved such broad, cross-cultural appeal. The debate over Ganesha's "true" character also reflects a fundamental tension within religious systems: the need to accommodate popular, potentially "untidy" folk beliefs while maintaining theological coherence and orthodox boundaries. Ganesha sits precisely at this intersection, making his story a case study in how

religions negotiate the integration of powerful, popular figures whose origins may lie outside established orthodoxy.

8. Conclusion: Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Ganesha's Character and Nature

The investigation into Ganesha's character and nature reveals a surprising developmental history and profound complexity. Originating from the feared, obstacle-creating Vināyakas of early Vedic ancillary texts and Smṛtis, the figure evolved through an ambivalently portrayed single deity in the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*. In Buddhist traditions, his development took divergent paths: demonized primarily as a demonic hinderer in Chinese Tantra, while appearing in Tibetan Vajrayāna as both a subdued force and an integrated protector and wealth deity. Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions harnessed his power for often transgressive rituals, depicting him in wrathful (*krodha*) forms associated with impurity and violence, exemplified by the Ucchiṣṭa Gāṇapatya sect.

Concurrently, within mainstream Hinduism, particularly in the Purāṇas, a transformation occurred towards the widely venerated, benevolent obstacle-remover (*Vighnahartā*) and Lord of Beginnings. This process involved his mythological integration as the son of Shiva and Parvati, the explanation of his unique iconography through diverse narratives, and his theological elevation to the status of the supreme being in the Gāṇapatya tradition. The Japanese Kangiten worship, in turn, preserves aspects of his demanding and potentially dangerous nature reminiscent of earlier phases.

Therefore, the question of Ganesha's "true character" is hard to be answered. His nature seems **fundamentally ambivalent and multifaceted**, centered around the **power over obstacles (*vighna*)** in all its forms – both creation and removal. The extreme variations in his portrayal might not be different perceptions of an unchanging core. Rather, they might reflect the selective emphasis and development of different facets of a core ambivalence within diverse historical, theological, and cultural contexts.

The hypothesis of a Puranic "sanitization" holds true in that mainstream Hinduism strongly emphasized benevolent aspects and likely deliberately downplayed or reinterpreted explicitly negative or demonic traits. However, this was not a simple act of purging but a complex process of **integration, myth-making, theological elevation, and harmonization**, aimed at incorporating and legitimizing an immensely popular figure, possibly originating from folk roots, into the orthodox framework.

Considering all these facts, questions arise. How is it possible, that a creature that was very well known and dreadfully feared as a demonic spirit in the past turned into the most

popular, beloved and positive deity? Did he secretly change his personality, change his mind radically? Do we possibly deal with different deities? Or just with fairy tales? Or is he simply both: demonic and divine in one? **Or are we, in fact, dealing with a wholly demonic entity that is deluding the world through lies and deception, being shielded by the Pantheon?** What about the stories of his past? If he existed long before his introduction into hinduism, how could he be Shivas and Parvatis son? In the end, one question remains: What does it matter? How would you answer?

References: Appendix